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Report of the Secretary-General on ways to combat subregional and cross-border problems in West Africa

I. Introduction

1. The increasing use and proliferation of mercenaries, child soldiers and small arms account for much of the instability in the West African subregion. This is not an exhaustive list of such problems. The culture of impunity, the spread of HIV/AIDS, the continued weakening of the security sector, the proliferation of roadblocks, youth unemployment, environmental degradation, social exclusion, remnants of war, mass refugee movements and other forced displacement, inequitable and illicit exploitation of natural resources, weak national institutions and civil society structures, and violations of human rights, including the rights of women, are some of the other serious cross-border problems afflicting many parts of the subregion.

2. These cross-border problems are related to one another and are exacerbated, especially, by the poor governance record in many parts of West Africa. None of them can be solved at the national level alone, but rather require a regional approach.

3. Although the three cross-border problems specified by the Security Council in its statement of 25 July 2003 (S/PRST/2003/11) are important contributory causes of conflict in West Africa, their relationship with the endless cycle of violence and instability is primarily symptomatic, not causal. It goes without saying that if warlords, militias and other armed groups, as well as some Governments, did not engage in armed conflict either on their own territory or on that of their neighbours, they would not seek to acquire ever-greater supplies of small arms and to use child soldiers and mercenaries, and the demand for all three would not exist.

4. As requested in the above-mentioned presidential statement, practical and concrete recommendations have been prepared following extensive consultations conducted by my Special Representative for West Africa within the United Nations system and among subregional organizations, especially the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and leading representatives of West African civil society organizations. Since the United Nations has in many different forums outlined the extremely negative consequences of those factors of instability spelled out in the Council's statement, it is not my intention to provide more background information on them. The present report, therefore, focuses on practical recommendations for addressing them.

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5. The recommendations presented in this document have been grouped under the following 12 broad headings:

1. Improving United Nations harmonization;
2. Ratification and observance of existing conventions;
3. Collaboration in the Mano River Union area;
4. Strengthening the ECOWAS secretariat;
5. Strengthening and implementing the ECOWAS Moratorium;
6. Supporting national commissions;
7. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes;
8. Security sector reform;
9. Reducing extortion at roadblocks within and between countries;
10. Strengthening civil society participation and awareness-raising;
11. "Naming and shaming";
12. Small arms exporters and private security companies.

II. Recommendations for addressing cross-border regional problems

1. Improving United Nations harmonization

6. Increased harmonization among the United Nations actors active in the West African subregion — avoiding duplication, maximizing linkages and comparative advantages, and enhancing coordination with other field offices — has long been an important goal. As a result of the ever-increasing regional dimension of conflicts, I decided, as the Security Council is aware, to establish the United Nations Office for West Africa, headed by my Special Representative, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, with a mandate in particular to harmonize United Nations efforts, including in relation to ECOWAS and the Mano River Union.

Recommendation 1. My Special Representative for West Africa should organize regular meetings among the senior staff of the various United Nations political and peacekeeping missions in the region, as well as the regional heads of the principal United Nations agencies and programmes covering humanitarian and development issues. The resulting exchange of relevant information and best practices should focus among other subjects on the issues under consideration in this report. Senior ECOWAS officials and representatives of civil society, including women's groups, should be invited to attend relevant parts of the meetings.

2. Ratification and observance of existing conventions

7. The international community, especially in Africa, is not short of instruments to address issues such as small arms, child soldiers and mercenaries. The United Nations, the African Union and ECOWAS have all ratified large numbers of treaties, conventions, charters and protocols relating to these problems and their harmful effects on the sub-region.

Recommendation 2. The United Nations, the African Union and ECOWAS should encourage regional Governments to ratify and abide by the provisions of existing conventions. Those signed international legal instruments should also be implemented as national laws. Furthermore, all States should adopt policies against the recruitment and use of child soldiers and mercenaries to criminalize any such recruitment, and also address the question of impunity in collaboration with the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and Special Rapporteurs. Since ratification is not an end in itself, but merely a step towards implementation, the United Nations and ECOWAS should monitor carefully, through their respective mechanisms, progress in this regard and provide advice where requested.

3. Collaboration in the Mano River Union area

8. The Mano River Union, composed of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, was a stabilizing element in the past. There have been many calls to re-energize the Union, which has foundered owing to mutual distrust among its member States. With the departure from power of former President Charles Taylor, however, there is now a real hope that inter-State relations within the Mano River Union can be improved. The United Nations system, including the Economic Commission for Africa and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), is already responding to requests for help to reinvigorate the Mano River Union.

Recommendation 3. ECOWAS and the United Nations, in consultation with the Mano River Union countries, and relevant civil society organizations, including the Mano River Women Peace Network, should explore ways and means of helping to enhance international attention to the priority cross-border problems confronting those countries, including the convening of an international conference on assistance to the Mano River Union. The United Nations should encourage the ongoing efforts of the States members of the Mano River Union to resume dialogue at the highest political level and to promote confidence-building, peace and stability in the subregion.

Recommendation 4. States of the Mano River Union, together with Côte d'Ivoire, with logistic and other assistance from UNMIL, UNAMSIL, MINUCI and others, should initiate joint security patrols and common border management in sensitive areas, including human rights monitoring where appropriate. The UNAMSIL Operation Blue Vigilance is an example of such collaboration. Joint security patrols with United Nations participation should start, since they would be an important capacity-building and confidence-building exercise for the police, armed forces and customs services of the four countries.

4. Strengthening the ECOWAS secretariat

9. In the report of the Security Council mission to West Africa, 26 June to 5 July 2003 (S/2003/688), it was recommended that my Special Representative for West Africa undertake a comprehensive study, in conjunction with the Executive Secretary of ECOWAS and concerned Member States, of ways in which the international community can increase its cooperation with, and assist in strengthening the capacity of, ECOWAS. Work on that study is under way, and a joint team composed of the European Commission, UNDP and the United Nations

Office for West Africa is to complete a needs assessment mission in March 2004. The current set of recommendations, therefore, will focus solely on those areas specified by the Council in its statement of 25 July: small arms, child soldiers and mercenaries.

Recommendation 5. ECOWAS headquarters may consider reinforcing its four observation and monitoring zones to enable them to gather as much reliable information on the cross-border problems as possible. Special information-sharing should be authorized between the observation and monitoring zone in Monrovia (covering the Mano River Union countries), the observation and monitoring zone in Ouagadougou (which covers Côte d'Ivoire), the Mano River Union and the Programme for Coordination and Assistance for Security and Development (PCASED) and Interpol. ECOWAS should also set up a database of individuals and groups suspected of engaging in the trafficking of illicit arms, mercenaries and child soldiers, which should be shared with the relevant national and international judicial authorities. The assets of those that have been indicted should be tracked and frozen.

Recommendation 6. Development partners should be encouraged to provide additional resources to enhance the monitoring and reporting capacity of the ECOWAS Child Protection Unit which, working in coordination with UNICEF and the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, could become a useful instrument for the protection of all children affected by armed conflict. The ECOWAS secretariat should also consider conducting studies of linkages between arms flows, child soldiers, mercenaries, refugee flows, illicit exploitation of natural resources, massive violations of human rights, and the drugs trade in order to better address these problems.

5. Strengthening and implementing the ECOWAS Moratorium

10. In an important demonstration of their commitment to combat the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in the subregion, ECOWAS heads of State and Government in 1998 declared a Moratorium on the Importation, Exportation and Manufacture of Small Arms and Light Weapons in West Africa. The Moratorium is the main platform for supporting regional efforts to control small arms. At the time of its declaration, the Moratorium was conceived as a voluntary, non-binding political arms control measure with the potential of preparing its signatory States for the establishment of a legally binding regime.

11. The Moratorium has had to contend with major impediments: lack of political will in some countries; weaknesses of national security institutions; violations of the Moratorium by some ECOWAS member States and other States and entities that have continued to supply small arms to West Africa in defiance of its code of conduct; ongoing civil wars creating extra demand; insufficient public awareness in the subregion about the Moratorium; and lack of financial resources.

12. The proliferation of small arms cannot be combated by a proliferation of small agencies. Since resources for institution-building to combat arms proliferation in West Africa are extremely limited, there is a need to minimize duplication, ensure the most efficient allocation of resources, and even perhaps to take some hard decisions. I welcome the commitment recently shown by ECOWAS member States in deciding to establish a Small Arms Unit. On the other hand, PCASED was set up

in 1998 to implement the Moratorium on small arms and to assist ECOWAS States in taking practical steps to ensure that illicit weapons do not cross their borders.

Recommendation 7. ECOWAS member States should consider, before the expiry of the current Moratorium period in 2004, the adoption of a legally binding instrument which would complement the important work done so far. Consideration should be given to including a ban on mercenaries operating directly or indirectly in their countries within the terms of the Moratorium or in any other arms control measure to be concluded. ECOWAS should make its prohibitions, including those contained in the 1978 Protocol on Non-Aggression, legally binding, with the understanding that its member States would punish violations at the subregional level. It should also call on the Security Council to impose international sanctions against the Governments responsible for such violations.

Recommendation 8. States members of ECOWAS should harmonize national legislation and common penalties in West Africa regarding small arms and mercenaries. To this end, the international community and the United Nations should offer legal and other assistance. In line with Security Council resolution 1467 (2003), work should also begin on an ECOWAS regional register that would record national inventories of small arms and light weapons. Where appropriate, work carried out by the panels of experts on sanctions on Liberia should be made available to ECOWAS for this purpose. In addition, small arms experts who have worked on the panels should occasionally be seconded to support ECOWAS in the development of its regional arms register.

Recommendation 9. In order to avoid duplication and send a clear signal to development partners and others, ECOWAS heads of State should make a decision regarding the future relationship of PCASED and the ECOWAS Small Arms Unit. Once there is a clear-cut rationalization and division of labour between the two, I will call on the United Nations and the donor community to provide increased support for this essential task.

6. Supporting national commissions

13. Under the associated measures for the implementation of the Moratorium, ECOWAS member States were called upon to establish or strengthen national commissions or other domestic arms control institutions. PCASED has initiated important work in this direction, although, like the national commissions, it suffers in particular from a serious lack of resources.

Recommendation 10. ECOWAS should help to reinforce the important role member States must play to strengthen their national commissions and broaden their mandates to include related phenomena such as the recruitment of mercenaries and child soldiers. In addition, the few West African countries that have still not set up national commissions should move to do so. To contribute to conflict prevention in the region, the United Nations, in close partnership with Governments and civil society organizations, should undertake capacity-building for national commissions, along the lines of the proposed UNDP project for small arms reduction in Ghana. Furthermore, the Organization should take the initiative of inviting the national commissions for joint training

which, undertaken in coordination with ECOWAS and PCASED, should also facilitate subsequent joint projects, especially on cross-border issues.

Recommendation 11. Experts and focal points on war-affected children and youth, including child soldiers, should be appointed within each national commission to liaise with the ECOWAS Small Arms and Child Protection Units, the observation and monitoring zones, the Mano River Union and concerned United Nations entities. Taken together, these should form an integrated monitoring and reporting network for regular, objective reports on violations against children. Moreover, Governments of the region are encouraged to include independent experts and key representatives of civil society in the commissions in order to broaden participation in this area, as stated in the Moratorium. The diversity and the independence of their members would strengthen the legitimacy of the national commissions.

7. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes

14. A key lesson from West African peace processes in the 1990s is that incomplete disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of combatants, including children and women, jeopardizes post-conflict reconstruction and increases the chances for a return to violence. All children in war zones are exposed to conflicts and may be recruited but, unless child soldiers are reintegrated into society after being demobilized, they remain at risk of re-recruitment. Where conflict has spanned many years, children have sometimes grown into adulthood by the time peace agreements are brokered.

Recommendation 12. Given their success to date, the lessons of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes in Mali and Sierra Leone should be closely studied and where appropriate applied in other areas of West Africa. Further consideration should be given to the proposal contained in the report of the Security Council mission to West Africa regarding a truly regional disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process, and relevant United Nations entities should examine its feasibility. This will involve additional collaboration between MINUCI, UNAMSIL, UNMIL and the United Nations Office for West Africa, a process that has already started, to ensure consistency and the adoption of best practices.

Recommendation 13. Following the culmination of disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, a comprehensive programme aimed at improving human security through the collection of arms and light weapons should be initiated, as was done in Sierra Leone with the Community Arms Collection and Destruction Programme. The programme should encourage voluntary disarmament through an approach whereby the provision of developmental projects is contingent on the successful collection of small arms within given communities. The disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme should also include the revision and enactment of laws on arms, ammunition and explosives as well as the establishment of a firearms licensing process. To address the needs of the communities receiving demobilized soldiers, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration should be accompanied by community development programmes.

Recommendation 14. All disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes should contain specific well-designed components for children

and women combatants. Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration for child soldiers should be open to all children associated with fighting forces, including victims of sexual violence, slavery and other forms of exploitation, as well as those currently in refugee and internment camps. Special attention has to be paid to the needs of girls, who have often been overlooked in assistance programmes and disadvantaged by social stigma. The contribution of children themselves as key agents in peace-building initiatives should not be underestimated in terms of designing disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programmes, disseminating information to other children on how such programmes work, and mobilizing systems at community level for the prevention of further recruitment.

Recommendation 15. Some of the key programmes available to children in the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process, particularly psychosocial counselling, family reunification, and educational opportunities, should also be made available to young adults who were recently child soldiers. The United Nations and ECOWAS should take into consideration the need to engage local groups, including women, and when useful follow local traditions in rehabilitating former combatants, including children. Priority emphasis should be placed by Governments and the international community on rebuilding infrastructures and social services such as schools and vocational training centres. This would help to absorb the unemployed youth and also provide child soldiers and other children affected by armed conflict with the benefits of an education, and provide support to the receiving communities.

Recommendation 16. Since unemployment is related to disarmament, demobilization and reintegration and the recruitment of child soldiers and mercenaries, concerned Governments and organizations should be invited to study the proposals contained in the forthcoming study by the United Nations Office for West Africa requested by the recent Security Council mission on ways to reduce youth unemployment in the region.

8. Security sector reform

15. The need for security sector reform lies at the heart of most cross-border regional problems, including the proliferation of small arms and the use of mercenaries and child soldiers. Weak and undisciplined national armies are a primary cause of insecurity in many parts of the world. Often unpaid, poorly trained and exposed to HIV/AIDS, some West African militaries constitute a serious menace to security and human rights in their own countries. This is an area where improvement is a prerequisite for West African stability. Regrettably, few outside Governments have shown keen or sustained interest in supporting reforms in the security sector.

Recommendation 17. The United Nations system, especially UNDP, and ECOWAS should assist in new and sustained efforts for resource mobilization to achieve security sector reform. As an incentive, donors should offer additional security sector assistance and training, including in international human rights and humanitarian law, if genuine efforts and progress are made on issues relating to arms proliferation, child soldiers and mercenaries. Those development partners that find it possible to provide assistance to militaries should increase their programmes, and those that find this difficult should

focus on reforming other security institutions such as the police, gendarmerie and customs. One reform would be to increase the number of women police and uniformed personnel.

Recommendation 18. In collaboration with ECOWAS, the United Nations Office for West Africa should organize in the second half of 2004 a meeting of defence and interior ministers of some West African countries, as well as representatives of relevant parliamentary oversight bodies, senior military officers and civil society representatives, to develop a common understanding of the importance of security sector reform in consolidating regional peace and stability and to explore the possibility of formulating specific security sector reform projects that could be submitted to potential donors.

Recommendation 19. To help to curb small arms and mercenaries, security sector reform should include enhancing the capacity of frontier services, such as border guards, police, immigration and customs. Donors are encouraged to provide more advanced and compatible equipment. Depending on the capacity of the States concerned and the inaccessibility of the border areas to be monitored, the needs can vary from satellite surveillance of low-flying aircraft to computers, communications and vision equipment, x-ray machines and quad bikes, as well as training. Carefully selected local civil society groups should be engaged in efforts to improve border monitoring. Special attention should be paid by the States of the region to providing security to camps for refugees and internally displaced persons and guarding against their militarization, which is a factor both in the spread of small arms and in the recruitment of child soldiers and other fighters.

Recommendation 20. Every State member of ECOWAS should maintain a central register of arms held by the military and national security agencies. To that end, computers and relevant training should be provided to permit the keeping of up-to-date records of all legal weapons in the country.

9. Reducing extortion at roadblocks within and between countries

16. It is essential that legitimate calls for increased vigilance in border areas not be used as an excuse to set up more roadblocks whose primary purpose is often to extort money from passing travellers and traders. The proliferation of checkpoints — to the extent that a number of security agencies set up separate roadblocks — adds to citizens' insecurity, especially for merchant women who are frequently harassed at them, and gravely hampers trade by raising transport costs to unsustainable levels.

Recommendation 21. ECOWAS should demand that its members abide by their own commitments to free passage for people and goods, including humanitarian access. At the same time, Governments in the region should issue compelling orders to reduce the number of illegitimate checkpoints and the practice of extortion at them. In the spring of 2003, a presidential appearance on television in one West African country announcing that roadblocks would be removed led to the immediate withdrawal of most of them. This initiative should be attempted elsewhere in the region and pursued for sustained periods. Lessons should also be drawn from Sierra Leone, where, after the conclusion of the Abuja Peace Agreement, UNAMSIL deployed robust patrols to

dismantle checkpoints erected by RUF, and the Government ensured the removal of checkpoints which hindered the movement of goods and civilians.

Recommendation 22. Governments should consider establishing elite undercover units of security officers, whose job is to monitor the level of abuse and extortion at checkpoints and dismantle illegal ones. Punishment of infractions should then be publicized in the media as a way of increasing the effectiveness of such units, whose areas of operation should be rotated in order to prevent a new source of corruption.

Recommendation 23. ECOWAS and its development partners, including the United Nations, should support campaigns by truck drivers, transport companies and consumer associations to reduce extortion at roadblocks. As a means of allowing less room for corruption in this area, ECOWAS should encourage States of the region to draw up harmonized, unambiguous and well-publicized guidelines for transporters on matters such as speed, load, types of goods, and conditions of vehicles. Transporters and other travellers should also receive documents certifying that their compliance with regulations has been verified. The United Nations Office for West Africa should work with ECOWAS, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and other relevant regional entities to help to keep attention focused on this issue of common concern.

10. Strengthening civil society participation and awareness-raising

17. The involvement of representatives of civil society in matters relating to governance and security is an area where the United Nations system, development partners and States of the subregion should focus considerably more attention. The inclusion of relevant sectors of civil society, in particular women's associations, both in devising and in implementing the most suitable strategies, not least through increasing public awareness, is an essential element in combating the phenomena of child soldiers, mercenaries, small arms proliferation and other cross-border issues.

Recommendation 24. The United Nations should consult and collaborate more systematically with local, national and international civil society organizations, including the private sector, religious leaders, and women's groups that are already working on cross-border issues in West Africa. Where appropriate, support should be provided to local grassroots participation in practical disarmament measures such as weapons collection, and in public-awareness programmes involving child and other ex-combatants.

Recommendation 25. Increased support should be provided for the media, especially radio stations, to broadcast messages and increase awareness among target populations about small arms, child soldiers and mercenaries. Consideration and support should be given both to national and to independent community radio stations. Messages to be propagated in local languages would include the dangers of proliferation; the need to reintegrate children forced to serve as soldiers or sex slaves; and the determination of the international and subregional community to take steps against the culture of impunity for violations of human rights. The raising of awareness should also be carried out in "floating" markets, especially near border areas where small arms are sold and violent activities sometimes planned.

Recommendation 26. Relevant United Nations entities should devise a concerted strategy to educate children about the harmful effects of becoming fighters at a young age, even if most child soldiers become fighters as a result of coercion. This would involve an attempt to break the culture of youth violence by using role models, including well-known singers, soccer players and actors who have played cinematic action heroes. Some ex-fighters should also be invited to schools to recount their regret at having wasted their formative years. Children should be taught in schools about human rights and the dangers of weapons proliferation, as well as techniques for peaceful conflict resolution in their everyday lives. Regional United Nations agency heads should ensure that all schools and vocational training centres receiving any aid from a United Nations entity include such teaching to all pupils.

11. Naming and shaming

18. "Naming and shaming" parties who contravene humanitarian norms and international law is one of the few tools at the disposal of the international community. In my report to the Security Council of 26 November 2002 (S/2002/1299), I named Governments and parties to conflict that recruit or use child soldiers. The Government of Liberia of the time and Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) both featured on the list. The practice did not stop, however. Indeed, there is growing evidence that other parties to conflict in West Africa have been engaged in it.

Recommendation 27. The United Nations, the African Union and ECOWAS, together with partners in civil society, should gather all available evidence in this regard. Both organizations should then pursue a more aggressive policy of "naming and shaming" as a supplement to the existing, often ineffective, monitoring mechanisms. Concerted pressure, including international sanctions, should be brought to bear at the highest levels on parties to conflict (State and non-State alike) who recruit mercenaries and child soldiers.

Recommendation 28. To help to prevent the recruitment of child soldiers, child protection entities, in collaboration with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and UNICEF, should conduct in-depth analysis of their screening and, without breaching confidentiality requirements, share their findings with other relevant institutions within both the United Nations and ECOWAS.

Recommendation 29. The Security Council, as well as regional organizations such as the African Union, the European Union and NATO, should "name and shame" commercial companies and individuals from member States that flout conventions relating to the export of small arms to the subregion and the use of child soldiers and mercenaries. Should those States be seeking to join such regional groupings, it should be made clear that their chances of success will be affected by their activities in this regard. The European Union should enforce the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports, and impose sanctions on offending States, including new members. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe should also explore ways of preventing its member States from exporting illicit small arms to West Africa.

Recommendations 30. NATO should ensure that its demand for interoperability among the armed forces of its new member States leads to the

physical destruction of obsolete weapons and not their export to West Africa. It should also establish safeguards to prevent those same countries from encouraging — through subsidies or dumping practices — newly liberalized arms manufacturers to sell small arms to West Africa.

12. Small arms exporters and private security companies

19. Small arms proliferation is not just about poor standards of governance in West Africa that have led to conflicts and continuing demand for small weapons. Supply is also a major factor behind this phenomenon, which has inflicted so much damage in the subregion. Various unscrupulous parties have willingly played the role of merchants of death. The international community needs to address both the supply and the demand side with regard to private companies selling small arms or security services. On the one hand, Governments may legitimately engage private security firms. On the other hand, there have been cases of such companies serving as a front for mercenary activity and the illegitimate exploitation of natural resources.

Recommendation 31. In order to improve traceability, Governments of countries exporting small arms should insist that manufacturers be far more punctilious in inscribing indelible serial numbers on weapons. Importing Governments should strengthen their procedures for issuing end-user certificates and exporters should ensure that these are genuine and accurate. At the same time, ECOWAS member States should establish and maintain mechanisms for verifying end-user certificates for weapons sales.

Recommendation 32. The Security Council may consider encouraging Member States to pass legislation imposing an obligatory insurance policy on small arms exporting companies for damages caused by those weapons. The insurance system, similar to car insurance, would cover victims of small arms, and also help to make the price of small arms less attractive. To ensure implementation, such a measure should eventually be included in legally binding international conventions.

Recommendation 33. Governments in the subregion requesting the services of private security services should make it a point to secure bilateral agreements with the countries where such companies are based or registered in order to ensure greater accountability.

III. Observations

20. The cross-border regional issues identified by the Security Council in its presidential statement (S/PRST/2003/11), namely, child soldiers, mercenaries and small arms, have greatly exacerbated poverty and insecurity within West Africa. Addressing those problems in a comprehensive manner will require a fundamental change in the political approach that has prevailed in much of the subregion during the past 20 years. That approach, which has promoted authoritarianism and resulted in a culture of impunity, violence, exclusion and extortion, should be replaced with one that promotes democracy, accountability, peace, tolerance, gender equality and transparency.

21. If the regional and international community is serious about addressing the scourges afflicting parts of West Africa, what is required is not merely political and

financial commitment on the part of Governments but a wholesale reform of governance. Preventing abuse by State and non-State actors and ensuring respect for the rights and security of the peoples living in all parts of the region must be central to any strategy to ensure stability and development in West Africa. Special attention should be paid to areas such as Guinée-Forestière in Guinea, to take one example, whose geographical location and other factors have made them especially vulnerable to many of the most pressing cross-border problems outlined in the present report.

22. Issues relating to improved governance in West Africa, including human rights and transparency, are in the first instance the responsibility of national Governments. The regional and international community should help, however, not only by providing targeted assistance in those areas and ensuring that international standards are respected but also by responding at an earlier stage to governance and humanitarian crises, rather than staying silent until a foreseeable military takeover or an explosion of inter-communal violence has occurred. The international community should also maintain a significant and robust presence in post-conflict countries to prevent regression into conflict and to promote the consolidation of good governance and national ownership of the peace-building processes. I hope that the Security Council will bear this in mind when considering the mandates of United Nations peace operations in this troubled region.

23. It is my hope that the members of the Security Council will explore ways of enhancing the capacity of ECOWAS to address cross-border regional issues; support the activities of the relevant civil society organizations, including women's associations, and choose specific recommendations from among those made in the present report on which to take action.